

## Item #18: Gray Wolf Populations

**Evaluation Objectives:** To evaluate gray wolf population changes; number of packs, productivity, and known human-caused mortality on the forest.

**Methods:** The FWS has collected information concerning the number, location and production of wolf packs in the area in cooperation with the Montana FWP. Montana FWP attempts to place radio collars on wolves in each pack to document residency and production. Radio-collared wolves are tracked and located by aircraft approximately twice per month. Annual reports are prepared by MT FWP.

**Evaluation:** Originally the FWS and now the MT FWP collects annual information concerning the number, location, and production of wolf packs in the area. The recovery goal is 10 packs in northwestern Montana.

The following table shows the minimum fall wolf population and breeding pairs in the northwest Montana recovery area for the years 1986 – 2007.

**Table 18-1.** Minimum Fall Wolf Population and Breeding Pairs in the NW MT Recovery Area for Years 1986-2007

Year	86	87	88	89	90	91	92	93	94	95	96	97	98	99	00	01	02	03	04	05	06	07
Population	15	10	14	12	33	29	41	55	48	66	70	56	49	63	64	84	108	92	59	130	167	230
Breeding Pairs	1	2	1	1	3	1	4	4	5	6	7	5	5	6	6	7	12	4	6	11	12	23

In 2007, 36 packs were thought to contain 23 breeding pairs. Packs are distributed from near the Montana-Idaho border east to the Rocky Mountain Front, and from the Montana-Canada border south, and from Interstate 90 to the Flathead National Forest. These areas, provide habitat, or at least partially, for approximately 12 packs.

Annual reports are available at <http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/species/mammals/wolf/annualreports.htm>. Human caused mortality is limited on the forest. Most human caused mortality is associated with livestock conflicts. Only 2500 animal unit months are permitted on the forest which is a very minor amount compared to other parts of Montana.

Northwest Montana wolf numbers and breeding pairs have progressed in size since the 1992-1997 forest plan reporting period. 2007 was the 8<sup>th</sup> year in which 30 or more breeding pairs were documented within the Northern Rocky Mountain (NRM) states (ID, WY, and MT) area. Because threats have been reduced, on February 27, 2008, the FWS (Federal Register 2008b) announced the *final rule designating the northern rocky mountain population of gray wolf as a*

*distinct population segment and removing this distinct population segment from the federal list of endangered and threatened wildlife*, effective March 28, 2008. After the wolf population is delisted, the ESA requires a mandatory, minimum 5-year post-delisting oversight period during which the FWS reviews the implementation of state management plans and wolf population status, providing a safety-net to ensure that the species is able to sustain itself without ESA protection. If wolves became threatened again, the FWS could relist them by emergency order. However, after the February 2008 delisting, a lawsuit was filed to reverse the FWS decision and on 7/18/2008 the court granted an injunction that read, “Endangered Species Act protections are hereby reinstated for the northern Rocky Mountain gray wolf pending final resolution of this matter on the merits”. The species is once again an endangered species and management actions with potential effects will once again undergo consultation with the FWS.

**Recommended Action:** The FWS and Montana FWP have been monitoring the population since the late 1980s. The MT FWP has assumed wolf management from the FWS. Montana FWP is required to continue monitoring populations in Montana. The forest needs to maintain adequate big game (elk and deer) habitat for prey, continue to provide for expansive areas of non-roaded habitat, continue to maintain low livestock density under special use permits, and as needed coordinate project proposals with MT FWP for technical advice. This reporting item is accomplished by MT FWP and all data reported here is provided within their annual report. Biologists should continue to use wolf management biologists for technical assistance as needed and utilize the MT FWP annual wolf reports for project assessments.